

United State Senate

Subcommittee on Education and Early Childhood Development

July 14, 2006 Hearing

Written Testimony of Senator J. Chris Ullo

Chairman, Louisiana State Senate Education Committee

I have served in the legislature for over 30 years and, until three years ago when I became chair of Senate Education, I have never served on an education committee. But education has always been a matter of great interest and concern to me. I represent a district adjacent to the City of New Orleans and I have long been aware of the difficult and seemingly intractable struggles of the New Orleans public schools.

For many years I served with my friend, Senator Cecil Picard. His leadership was important to my view of educational policy then as it is now. Cecil's leadership in his role as state superintendent has been the basis for much of the progress Louisiana has made in its public schools.

Louisiana has 69 local public school systems most of which are coterminous with the parish government. Four of these systems are city or community systems and this total includes the Recovery School District as well. These systems serve student populations ranging in size from barely 1000 to 50,000+. The implementation of state law and state board regulation in these systems varies widely from one system to another yet all are monitored for compliance with state and federal requirements. Some of these systems are providing outstanding educational opportunities to the students they serve; others don't do so well. Before Katrina, New Orleans Public Schools served approximately 10% of the public school students in the state and was one of the systems that was a matter of greatest concern both for the legislature and for the educational leadership structure.

Under Supt. Picard, Louisiana has been on the forefront of developing and institutionalizing a statewide "school by school" and "school system by school system" accountability system. Our accountability system is and always has been centered on student performance and it has been in place long enough to provide us with a reliable view of the performance of our students and each of the schools and systems.

Our accountability results, particularly as adjusted to comply with the federal "No Child Left Behind Act", starkly revealed to all what was long felt to be true by many, that the vast majority of schools in New Orleans were performing well below the standard needed for our children to succeed. In addition, there were legislative hearings concerning the

financial structure of New Orleans and two or three other schools systems which were stimulated in part by federal concern regarding the use of federal Title I money.

The students' academic performance and the revealed lack of proper financial controls combined in the early years of this decade to create the political will to try to address in state law the need to "do something about New Orleans schools". We could no longer blame the poverty in which many of these students lived, although the poverty certainly was a factor. It was time to try to address the structure.

Several significant, highly controversial, and politically difficult pieces of legislation, that were attempts to get at the problem, were passed prior to Katrina.

1) We tried to transfer most of the authority from a dysfunctional school board to the local superintendent. At the time, New Orleans had a superintendent that had an impressive turn-around track record. Ultimately, this effort didn't solve the problem.

2) We created the Recovery School District as an intermediate educational unit run by our State Board of Education and provided that failing schools under the existing accountability program anywhere in the state that were not turned around by their local school boards would be transferred into the Recovery District to allow the state to provide for improvement in these schools before returning them to their "home" district.

3) We created auditing structures designed to assure that we got some control over the financial mess that had developed.

4) Ultimately, we enhanced the Recovery District plan to redefine failing schools so that all schools performing below the state average that were in a system where the majority of the schools were unacceptable were moved into the Recovery District.

5) The state superintendent negotiated with state, federal and local New Orleans officials to bring in Alvarez and Marsal to manage the finances and get the school board back on a sound fiscal basis.

All of these things occurred before the storm.

As a result, when Katrina washed away many of the facilities and the bulk of the students were forced to relocate to other parts of the state or the country, the largest portion of the responsibility for rebuilding the school fell to the state-run Recovery School District.

It is an awesome responsibility and provides the opportunity to rebuild a system that will be the very heart of the rebuilding of the city itself. Recognizing this historic opportunity, the legislature placed over \$40 million dollars into the Recovery District this fiscal year.

Dr. Robin Jarvis is here. She is the superintendent of the Recovery District. She can tell you exactly what they are doing and how.

The legislature, together with our Board of Regents for Higher Education, has successfully redesigned our teacher preparation programs to the point where 99% of college of education graduates are meeting all state certification requirements at the point of completion.

We are proud that Louisiana's determined efforts in education have been recognized in recent years. We have been acknowledged in *Education Week* and by others as having:

- 1) Ranked # 1 in the nation in efforts to improve teacher quality for 2005 and 2006.
- 2) Ranked # 1 in the nation in student standards and accountability in 2005 and 2006.
- 3) First state in the nation to institute "High Stakes" testing in elementary and middle school.

But how we respond to the devastation of Katrina is a story that will define our state for the next generation.

I am glad you are here and want to know what is happening. This city and state will need the full cooperation of all the partners to rebuild. But I believe that as we rebuild, providing a high quality education to all of the city's children is the keystone to our success.